

## He Lives!

Luke 24:1-12

<sup>1</sup> But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. <sup>2</sup> They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup> but when they went in, they did not find the body. <sup>4</sup> While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. <sup>5</sup> The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. <sup>6</sup> Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, <sup>7</sup> that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." <sup>8</sup> Then they remembered his words, <sup>9</sup> and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. <sup>10</sup> Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. <sup>11</sup> But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. <sup>12</sup> But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Our text starts with the early morning discovery that Jesus has risen from the dead. The tomb is empty and Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them accept their mission of witness to tell the disciples and everyone who will listen that Jesus is not among the dead!

The Gospels are silent about the events that take place between the burial of the body of Jesus in the late afternoon of Good Friday and the visit of the women to the tomb early Sunday morning. It is in this silence that the ancient celebration of the Easter Vigil fits. We wait with the followers of Jesus, remembering how women among them planned to go to the tomb and give Jesus' body a proper cleansing and anointing, a suitable wrapping, and an appropriate burial as soon as the Sabbath ended.

The women, nor the disciples had time to participate in the mourning ritual. Joseph had hurriedly prepared Jesus' body for burial as best he could, but it was the women who usually prepared the corpse for interment. Usually they

would have washed the body, then scented it with fragrant oil, an act of devotion that would also be repeated at the tomb. Washed and scented, the body was dressed in the person's own clothes or else wrapped in specially prepared sheets. Then, as soon as possible, it was carried upon a bier to the tomb. Relatives, friends, and professional mourners formed a procession, and anyone meeting it was obligated to show honor to the deceased and the relatives by joining. A eulogy was often delivered at the grave site. The body was placed on a shelf in the tomb, which was then sealed by a heavy, tight-fitting slab. If it had not been the Sabbath, all this would have been done by now.

The silence is broken as we begin to hear from Luke of the women's walk to the place where Jesus was laid. We imagine their shadows flitting in and out of the shadows of the landscape of early morning. When they arrive to see the stone at the opening rolled back, we see with them the yawning emptiness of the mouth of the tomb. It is no use pretending at this point that we are surprised—we already know what they will find when they enter.

The very familiarity of the scene hinders our attention to Luke's unique details in his version. For example, we might not notice that Luke talks of two men dressed in luminous clothing in the tomb, not the one figure that Mark and Matthew mention. Matthew even calls him an angel. Surely in Luke they are the same kind of otherworldly messengers. Even more significant, however, is the response of the women. In Mark's Gospel, the women are

amazed; in Matthew's it is the guards who are fearful. Luke tells us that the women are afraid and bow their faces low to the ground.

In the face of the totally unexpected mystery that confronts them, this abasement seems wholly appropriate. The stone rolled away from the doorway, the body of their teacher gone, the appearance of two strangely bright men—all these things cannot help but elicit their terrified awe. Yet we who are accustomed to this story, who are used to thinking of Jesus as our good buddy, who have tried to make God as knowable and dependable as breakfast cereal, hardly linger at the dreadful silence of these women with their faces in the dirt. Our efforts to tame the holy inure us to their fear. We miss Luke's first lesson in this account: God's ways are not our ways. They are beyond human comprehension; they subvert what we expect; they demand the impossible. They are holy precisely because they are not of our own making. When we encounter God's ways, our first response should acknowledge that fact with more than a nod.

Luke's second lesson comes only moments later. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" the angelic figures say to the tops of the women's heads. We are just as guilty of such a fruitless search. We too want to tend the corpses of long dead ideas and ideals. We cling to former visions of ourselves and our churches as if they might come back to life as long as we hold on to them. We grasp our loved ones too tightly, refusing to allow them to change, to become bigger, or smarter, or stronger. We choose to stay with what we know in our hearts to be dead, because it is safe, malleable, and so susceptible

to burnishing through private memory. The words of the unworldly messengers are a challenge to stop hanging on to the dead and to move into new life. They are reminders that the Holy One dwells wherever new life bursts forth.

The third lesson from Luke is also found in the mouths of the two angelic beings. "Remember how he told you," they tell the women, "that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again" (v. 7). This memory connects the empty tomb with the very human Jesus who ate and talked, suffered and died. In Alan Culpepper's words, "Remember what Jesus had done and what he had taught. Remember the meals in Jesus' fellowship, his healings and his parables, the bent woman and the ten lepers. Would you understand the meaning of the empty tomb? Remember Galilee." The admonition to remember grounds the mystery of resurrection in the everyday world of human living as well as in the demanding communal ethic that Jesus taught.

This means that the boundless gift of the empty tomb cannot be separated from the words and actions of Jesus. Resurrection, after all, is not some buoyant ideal, unconnected to the real world. It is an invitation to live as Jesus lived, a doorway to a life in which meals are shared with enemies, healing is offered to the hopeless, prophetic challenges are issued to the powerful. Only now it is not Jesus who does these things—it is we ourselves who see at last the subversive power of the resurrection in order to live it now. On that first dim Easter morning, when women cowered in the dust and angels picked

them back up, pointing them out the door of a tomb into the full light of morning, the power of God was no longer unspoken. The silence was broken, and the women rushed back to tell the others about what they had seen. No matter that the others did not believe at first. Who *could* believe, under the circumstances? No matter that Peter had to test the women's story by running to the tomb, seeing for himself the linen clothes, and wondering all the way back home about what he had seen. The women knew. The women remembered. The women believed. The women responded by breaking their own silence to speak their own truth. Which is, after all, exactly what God asks of us. **Nancy Claire Pittman**

Jesus is risen, he is risen indeed!

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